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CHINESE SILVERWORK

(Special Correspondence of THE COLLECTOR)

SILVER is to the Orient what gold is to the west. To the artist, the artisan, the scholar and the collector, it is the king of all the precious metals. Its popularity is not due to its cheapness. Jade, which rivals silver in public esteem, is much more expensive than gold. There may be another reason for the small use of gold as an ornament by the Chinese. In the designation of rank and title a gold button stands at nearly the bottom of the list. Then, on the other hand, golden yellow is the Imperial color, and none but those around the Son of Heaven are allowed to use it for wearing, and other purposes.

Silver jewelry and curios in China are universal. The poorest coolie's wife has usually an argent bracelet and ear-rings. In curios and bric-à-brac, the number of silver articles is legion. The greatest manufacturing centre is Canton; but Amoy, Foochow, Nanking and Peking possess artists and guilds whose workmanship is famous over the empire. Hours may be spent profitably in studying the designs of these eastern artificers. One class of these would delight the lover of oddities. It consists of miniature reproductions of features of daily life, and is adapted for ear-rings, watch-charms, pendants and bangle attachments. Among the more familiar objects are the pagoda, sampan (or native boat), junk, the sedan-chair, the small-footed lady's shoe, the Goddess of Mercy, the Celestial Poodle, the king of the fishes, the sitting Buddha, the dragon, the flying serpent, the begging bonze, the tiger, lion, horse, pig, buffalo, elephant, turtle, crocodile, monkey, cat and dog. The longest does not exceed two inches in length; from this figure they diminish in size down to dainty little objects no larger than peas. The finish is admirable, the features and hair of the human beings and animals, the scales of the fish and crocodiles, the markings of the turtle's carapace, being reproduced with the highest care and skill.

Another class consist of imitation cordage. The metal is solid, but the surface is so cleverly wrought out that at first sight each piece seems a rope, crotchetted cord or braid. Some are as fine as sewing silk, while others are thick as clothes lines. The silver is alloyed with a small per centage of copper, to increase its hardness and to allow the

fine carving and grading impossible with the pure metal. These cords are used for bracelets, anklets, necklaces, belts, sword-hangings and horses' harness. Though stiff, they are not rigid, and bend easily in every direction. They can be tied into knots and untied without breaking.

A third class comprises household ornaments, such as match boxes, ash cups, joss-stick bowls, sandal-wood urns, plates for opium pipes, button boxes, and so on without end. It is of the same general type and about the same value as those made in America and Europe.

A fourth class includes filagree work and tissues, made from fine silver wire, and is marked by the highest eloquence. It is a favorite kind of work among the Chinese, and has been for centuries. There is but little doubt that Marco Polo brought specimens of it to Europe from Nanking, and that in this manner aided in the after-development of the guilds of Italy and France. The designs at times are simply delicious. One from Foochow consisted of a bouquet over which was loosely wrapped a silk veil. It was so perfectly done that the veil looked as if it might blow away at any moment. Through its filmy folds the flowers and leaves were all visible. Another gem was a slight bouquet, in which ferns, lilies of the valley, and similar delicate organisms were practically photographed in metal.

A custom of the trade deserves mention. In selling their goods the Chinese silversmiths give the weight in silver, its fineness and its value as bullion; and then as a separate item the cost of the workmanship. Thus one day in purchasing a pair of corded bracelets my bill ran as follows:

Silver, $4\frac{1}{2}$ oz. 85 per cent fine.... \$4 20 Mex.
Workmanship..... 2 15

\$6 35 Mex.

The first item is mathematically correct every time, and is of great aid to your "uncle." How would it work in Tiffany's?

EDWARD BEDLOE.

Amoy, September 5, 1892.

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